

Leadership and the Future of Higher Education

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Each fall, the Institute of Higher Education sponsors the Louise McBee lecture in higher education. The lectureship honors one of the State of Georgia's best known and most influential educators and brings attention to important issues in higher education. Launched in 1989, the event brings a distinguished scholar or public figure to the campus of the University of Georgia to lecture and conduct seminars on higher education.

A native of Strawberry Plains, Tennessee, Dr. McBee completed a Ph.D. at The Ohio State University and held educational positions in Virginia and Tennessee, before moving in 1963 to the University of Georgia as Dean of Women. At that time, no one recognized what a major force she would be at the University of Georgia and in the state over the next four decades.

At UGA, she served on the faculty and in various academic capacities including Dean of Students, Senior Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Vice President for Academic Affairs. As a dean of student affairs, she was one of only four women in the U.S. holding this position at that time.

A highly successful career in university administration was not enough for the energetic, indomitable leader, Louise McBee. In 1991, after her retirement from UGA, she was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives, and she served six terms before stepping down in 2004. In her final term, she served as chair of the House Higher Education Committee. Throughout two careers, she demonstrated a vision for higher education, commitment to the process, and the integrity and tenacity to tackle complex problems and to set and attain high goals for the public good.

The 21st annual speaker in 2009 was Jamie Merisotis, CEO and president of the Lumina Foundation for Education (<http://www.luminafoundation.org/>). Merisotis follows in a long line of influential speakers including in 2008 Molly Broad, President of the American Council on Education; in 2006 Nils Hasselmo, President of the Association of American

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Universities; and in 1998 Lee Shulman, then President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Merisotis focused on the national importance of college access, student persistence, and graduation from two- and four-year colleges to enhance individual quality of life and to advance the public good and national productivity and competitiveness. Lumina's strategic plan, titled the "Big Goal 2025" is to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025 (see http://www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025/). The U.S. college completion rate presently stands at 39%, where it has been flat for almost 40 years. For many years, the U.S. was the leader in college attainment, but that is slipping as other countries are graduating more of the younger population (25–34) than the U.S. Lumina suggests that the United States ignores this fact at its peril!

The Lumina Foundation focuses exclusively on college access and completion and is the nation's largest private, independent foundation active in this arena. To reach its Big Goal, Lumina stresses three critical outcomes: preparation, success, and productivity. First, students must be academically, financially, and socially prepared for success in education beyond high school. Second, higher education institutions must improve student success toward completion by using proven instructional strategies and must define and measure student learning outcomes in the context of workforce needs. Third, higher education institutions must improve productivity "to expand capacity and serve more students."

The goals for education and the importance of these goals to the society at large—indeed the public good—were clearly understood and supported when Louise McBee served as an academic leader at the University of Georgia and when she politicked under the gold dome of the Georgia state capitol. She showed leadership in advancing effective educational practice, shaping public policy, and influencing the understanding and the will of the public: three strategies described by Lumina to achieve the Big Goal. Louise knew how to capture and articulate complicated issues and how to unite opposing individuals to build a shared vision for educational support. She understands education, and during her career she knew how to communicate with colleagues and the public about educational needs and programs.

In their strategic plan Lumina describes the importance of garnering the public will for educational change and advancement. Their public-will model includes increasing awareness, understanding, conviction, and commitment to meet their goals. Where will Lumina find the current day Louise McBees across the 50 states? Who will advance their agenda in public will? Who will selflessly serve the public good over individual gain?

As I thought about the goals of Lumina and Dr. McBee's career, I could see clear parallels. Long before Lumina set its Big Goal, Louise was an advocate for women and underserved populations in education; she was committed to the public purposes of education, and she was committed to public education with a conviction that far exceeded any expectation of personal gain or reward. Perhaps foundations are the new leaders in higher education; certainly Lumina is in this position, with the leverage of money, a passionate leader, and a well-defined national platform. Lumina will need, however, people to carry the message and do the work. As I look across state houses and see the support for education faltering, I wonder who will step forward to partner with Lumina to make a difference? Who will lead?